

A positive psychology approach to tackling bullying in secondary schools: A comparative evaluation

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Abstract

Anti-bullying interventions in schools favour approaches that practically tackle the problems in the classroom as well as the playground. However, the effectiveness of curriculum-based interventions is often context specific. A Positive Psychology (PP) approach to tackle bullying focuses upon the individual strengths of pupils rather than behaviours. It foregrounds the greater involvement of pupils in problem-solving the issue of bullying, and promotes development of personal qualities that are valued both socially and individually. In this study, a positive psychology intervention programme was designed for implementation in a school's year seven Personal, Social & Health Education (PSHE) lessons, with a control group recruited from another school. The effectiveness of the programme was measured both pre- and post-intervention using self-report questionnaires which included items on bullying behaviour, general well-being and mental health. Results indicated that, among those pupils who experienced the PP intervention programme, levels of bullying reduced and they scored marginally better in terms of general well-being but not mental health. Further developments in the programme are underway.

Introduction

Pupil consultation within the school environment often prioritises the understanding of social or practical issues (e.g. lockers, school dinners, playground facilities) rather than academic ones. However, within the past few years educationalists have recognised the value of pupils' input into pastoral systems and structures. Fullan (2001) emphasised the need to hear students' voices, noting that students were often perceived more as beneficiaries of programmes rather than as participants in the process of negotiating change. This realisation of the potential role pupils can play in bringing about change is reflected within the priorities set out in the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DiES, 2005). Given the emphasis placed upon pupil engagement, there is likely to be a continued growth in the literature evaluating this and other such approaches in the coming years. In this paper we will explore how a programme drawing from Positive Psychology (PP) led to a change in reports of

bullying among secondary school pupils in an English school.

Over the past two decades, the nature and prevalence of bullying in schools, together with an assessment of psycho-social factors, has been of increasing interest to those interested in educational psychology and child development. Current definitions of 'bullying' include references to forms of harassment that include repeated overt aggression (physical and verbal) and psychological distress (Galloway, 1994; Haynie et al., 2001, Olweus, 1999). Actions such as the intent to cause physical or emotional harm to another, or to deprive an individual or group of social relationships or possessions are also included in definitions (Tattum, 1993; Olweus, 1993).

In the UK, in their study of pupils' experiences of bullying in six primary and six secondary schools, Oliver and Candappa (2003) found that 51 per cent of Year 5, and 28 per cent of Year 8 pupils reported being victimised in some way by their peers. Particularly vulnerable pupils include those who

may be singled out because of their actual or perceived minority status being labelled 'lesbian' or 'gay' or those who have special educational needs (Eslea & Mukhtar, 2000; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Rivers & Duncan, 2002). It is interesting to note that, since the early work on anti-bullying interventions conducted in the 1990s by Smith and colleagues, rates of bullying seem to be at an all-time high when compared to figures such as 25 per cent for primary schools and 10 per cent for secondary schools in the mid 1990s (see Smith et al., 2004).

Bullying has also been shown to have significant negative effects on the physical and emotional health of both bullies and their victims (Weinhold, 2000), with exposure to repeated acts of bullying having more marked impact on victims (Due et al., 2005). Recent research has highlighted outcomes of bullying within schools such as poor attitude to school, substance abuse, absenteeism and even suicide (Feinberg, 2003; OFSTED, 2003). Previous exposure to trauma (including victimisation), duration and frequency of events, and the personal meaning for the individual are involved in predicting the onset of mental health problems (Yule, 1999). Additionally, among minority groups, self-selected coping strategies may result in further problems and have been linked to the onset of substance abuse (Due et al., 2005).

Salmivalli et al. (1999) noted that, among victims, a lack of a sense of having control together with a perceived lack of social support significantly impacts upon the well-being of these pupils. Indeed, Demaray and Malecki (2003) have emphasised the role of social support as a protective factor, acting as a buffer against stress.

With the increasing interest in bullying issues in schools, numerous intervention programmes have been developed, aimed at reducing bullying behaviour. One of the first substantial evaluations of an anti-bullying intervention was that conducted in Bergen by Olweus in the 1980s. Olweus reported a 50 per cent attrition in bullying, utilising his

step-by-step approach to whole school training and intervention. Differing antibullying approaches have been trialled, and some, it has been argued, are counter-productive, resulting in a change of behaviour of victims rather than that of pupils who bully (Olweus, 2004). Yet many of these programmes have not been empirically evaluated and, as a result, their efficacy may only be context specific, and thus do not fulfil the claims of general efficacy (Rappaport, 2000).

The application of positive psychology

Positive Psychology (PP) is primarily concerned with the empirical study of human happiness and strengths. It is also concerned with individuals' resilience to negative life events including bullying. Simply speaking PP represents an attempt to unite research and theory about what makes life worth living (Peterson & Park, 2003). It has emerged as a reaction to the pathology-focused nature of much research and intervention work conducted in psychology.

The concept of *happiness* is somewhat vague and many researchers have dissolved the term into different categories. Seligman (2003) began by identifying three different paths to attaining 'happiness':

- i) Positive emotion – (the pleasant life);
- ii) Engagement – (the engaged life);
- iii) Meaning – (the meaningful life).

Positive emotion represents a transient state of happiness which is mostly situation specific. *Engagement*, although reliant on the situation also, represents an activity where an individual can "lose oneself". *The meaningful life* represents purpose and the fulfilment of personal potential (Peterson, et al., 2005). Researchers have noted those who are most satisfied with life are those who aim towards all three states but with greater weight on *engagement* and *meaning* rather than *positive emotion*. Studies have shown the positive effect happiness can have on social relationships (see Seligman et al., 2005) and, therefore, any intervention aiming to develop or encourage positive social relationships must consider the extent to which

it is both *engaging* and *meaningful* to the individual.

Seligman et al. (2005) developed one of the first large scale intervention studies in PP. This internet-based study aimed to identify the impact of five different happiness exercises on overall reports of happiness ($N=577$ adults). After doing the exercises, a depression scale and the Steen Happiness Index (SHI, developed for use in the study) were completed. The distinctive intervention exercises included 'three good things in life', a 'gratitude visit', an account of 'you at your best', identification of 'signature strengths', and 'use of these strengths' in a new way. A placebo control exercise was also employed which required some participants to write about their early memories each night for one week. Participants in the control group showed an immediate boost in reports of happiness (SHI) and a decline in reports of depressive symptoms. However, this effect was short-lived and participants returned to baseline levels shortly after. This was also true for those who participated in the 'you at your best' intervention, the 'gratitude visit' and 'identifying signature strengths'. However, writing about three good things that happened each day and using signature strengths in a new way led to people reporting being happier and less depressed up to six months later. Seligman and his colleagues did not discount some of the short-lived interventions entirely. They argued that such interventions should not be undertaken in isolation, but rather as a component of a multi-exercise programme. Furthermore, they suggested that a multi-exercise programme may exceed the beneficial effects of any single exercise.

Drawing from a variety of sources, a number of interpersonal qualities have been identified as playing a central role in PP: for example, character strengths and virtues (Seligman, 2003) and positive emotions (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Personality traits such as agreeability and conscientiousness can often have a positive impact on social situations, such as group or classroom

activities (Seligman, 2004). The following interpersonal qualities are said to be largely situation-specific but can be nurtured amongst pupils: Altruism (Costa & McCrae, 1992), optimism (Seligman, 1998), empathy (Eisenberg et al., 1996), being good-natured or amiable and the ability to work with others on group tasks or towards a collective goal (Carr, 2004), social acceptance (Keyes, 1998), and patience and fairness (Vandiver, 2001). These interpersonal qualities inform the programme developed in this study.

Because PP seeks to adopt preventative measures by building from a baseline of mentally healthy individuals, a focus on positive interpersonal qualities (such as those mentioned above) could prove valuable in an anti-bullying intervention, if they could be systematically identified in each pupil and built upon. Indeed, pupils already exhibit many of these qualities to varying degrees in social situations. However, taking Seligman's hypothesis a step further, it would seem that it is the extent and manner in which these interpersonal qualities are exhibited that may help to reduce bullying. For example, some pupils may think of themselves as an accepting person, but still tease another if they are perceived as different. In that situation they were not accepting at that time and might want to think about why they were not. Indeed, pupils could be encouraged to think about how they could use these qualities in a new way (to tackle bullying in this instance). This would represent a similar approach to Seligman and his colleagues as mentioned above. By providing examples such as these and engaging pupils in activities that were meaningful to them, it was hypothesised that the prevalence of bullying would be lessened.

Background and aims of the present study

In conjunction with a Local Education Authority's Curriculum and Management Advisory Service, the first author (AR) undertook a pilot investigation where a positive psychology approach was designed to guide anti-bullying interventions for pupils in Year 7 of a secondary school in a sub-region, with

an additional school participating as a control. The purpose of the study was to determine whether or not a PP intervention would not only reduce bullying in schools post-intervention, but that it would also impact upon reports of general well-being and mental health.

Method

Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental non-related groups design. A target sampling method was used, where schools with similar bullying prevalence rates from a previous audit were approached. Two schools agreed that pupils in their year seven groups could complete three pre-intervention measures and then nine weeks later repeat the exercise. In the PP intervention school, eight Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons were delivered using materials designed by the authors. The second (control) school completed the questionnaires at a nine week interval, however, during the interim it followed the normal PSHE curriculum and did not include lessons on bullying issues.

Participants

In the PP intervention school, 258 pupils participated in the pre-test and 206 in the post-test. The sample comprised 51.8 per cent males and 48.2 per cent females (mean age 11.6 years). The majority described themselves as White British (88.4 per cent) or White other (5.2 per cent). The control school was from the same region, with pupils of both sexes from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic origins. A total of 162 pupils completed the pre- and post-intervention measures (mean age of 11.3 years). 46 per cent were males and 54 per cent females, with 91.4 per cent describing themselves as White British.

Instruments

The effectiveness of the programmes was measured using a pre- and post-intervention self-report questionnaire. Questions about the nature, and prevalence of bullying and substance abuse, were based on the que-

stionnaire developed by Olweus (1991). The KINDL-R questionnaire for measuring health-related quality of life in children and adolescents (Ravens-Sieberer & Bullinger, 1998) was utilised. The KINDL-R has six sub-scales each with four items measured on a five-point Likert scale. The sub-scales measure quality of physical health, feelings in general, personal worth, feelings about family, feelings about friends and feelings about school life. The instrument has a high degree of reliability (coefficient alpha \geq 0.70; Ravens-Sieberer & Bullinger, 1998).

The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) (Derogatis, 1975) is a 53-item inventory. Participants were asked how much a specific problem (e.g. 'feeling fearful') had distressed them in the past week, with responses on a five-point Likert scale. Six of the nine symptom dimensions were selected for use, based on the known association between experiences of bullying/victimisation and the onset of somatization disorders, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, and phobic anxiety. The BSI has high internal consistency (coefficient alphas range from 0.71–0.85), with good test-retest reliability, and convergent, discriminant and construct validity.

The PP intervention programme

The PP intervention programme lasted 9 weeks in total with teachers receiving lesson plan guidelines from the first author. The guidelines contained directions on objectives, outcomes and recommendations relating to the time spent on each task (referring to associated resources that were also provided). As teachers were not always familiar with PP concepts, explanations were included to highlight the purposes behind the sessions. Each session focused on the development and application of individual strengths and qualities within a social context, and were based upon the development and expansion of eight interpersonal qualities: empathy, altruism, optimism, team spirit, amiability, fairness, social acceptance, patience. Below we will provide a summery

of each lesson. As we are only able to give an outline in this paper, please contact the first author (AR) for a full description of each lesson plan and the resources used.

Session 1: Defining interpersonal qualities During this session the term 'interpersonal quality' was introduced to each class. The definitions for each of the eight qualities were also discussed with support from an overhead transparency (OHT) accompanied. Pupils were then provided with a worksheet with three of the qualities listed. These differed to allow pupils to work with different interpersonal qualities and share in a discussion afterwards. They were then asked to define those qualities and give examples of how they might apply them in a social setting such as school.

Session 2: Definitions of bullying – application of qualities Teachers were asked to discuss definitions of bullying and to list different types of behaviour, asking the class whether or not the behaviour was a type of bullying. Pupils were then given a worksheet with two accounts from victims of bullying and answered questions relating to helping behaviour and the interpersonal qualities, victims' feelings and forms of bullying. Teachers were then advised to emphasize that bullying is not always clearly obvious and to discuss the pupils' responses to the questions.

Session 3: Poster design using Information Communication Technology (ICT) – depicting individual strengths Pupils were asked to design a poster depicting one of their selected interpersonal qualities/strengths. The posters had to include a statement using the quality they chose e.g. 'Fairness includes everybody'. It was suggested that some posters were chosen for display in the Year Seven areas.

Session 4: Role play – applying interpersonal qualities This session involved pupils working in small groups. The groups were asked to think of a scenario where one member

is going through a difficult time and in need of some support. Examples were given (e.g. new to school, being bullied). Pupils were asked to portray a supportive role using one of the eight interpersonal qualities. Pupils were then asked to 'act out' their scenarios and other groups were to attempt to guess which interpersonal quality was being demonstrated. This aimed to give pupils an opportunity to think about how they might apply their strengths in a social setting.

Session 5: Pupils managing school – personal reflection Using either an OHT or worksheets, pupils were asked to complete a number of statements relating to the past year at school. The questions related to personal feelings about the past in school, both pleasant and unpleasant. Pupils were then asked to list five things that had happened in the past week, for which they were grateful for (see Seligman, 2005). In small groups, pupils were asked to imagine they were managing the school. Using the answers they had provided they compiled an action plan to improve interpersonal/supportive relationships between pupils and reduce bullying in school. At the end of this session a homework assignment was set, which involved listing three things each pupil was grateful for at the end of each day, for a total of one week.

Session 6: Optimism versus pessimism Definitions of optimism and pessimism were discussed. Pupils were then given a worksheet with questions on optimism and pessimism that related to them. The last question listed eleven words and pupils were asked to identify them as optimistic or pessimistic e.g. 'distrust', 'cheerful', 'hope'. Teachers were then asked to discuss responses with the class. Teachers were advised that studies have shown that optimism can act as a 'buffer' against depression when people experience negative life events (Carr, 2004) and that the pupils should understand that the outcome of a situation can depend on the outlook of the individual concerned.

Session 7: Developing and applying interpersonal qualities This session was developed to give pupils a greater insight into the meanings and applications of the eight interpersonal qualities. A worksheet was distributed which was designed to provoke deep thought on the subject. Definitions of the qualities were included to help them answer the questions. The questions related to second parties who lacked specific qualities, second parties who have employed their qualities to succeed, pupils employing their qualities to succeed, developing interpersonal qualities and helping behaviour.

Session 8: Recap and reflection This final session involved recapping and reflecting on the past seven sessions. Pupils were given a worksheet to complete with seven questions asking them to recount the previous sessions and content. They were also asked what aspects they liked and disliked and how they would apply what they had covered in day-to-day life.

Results

The nature and frequency of bullying

Overall, in the PP intervention school there was a significant reduction in reports of bullying, with 70.6 per cent of pupils saying they had not been bullied in the past two weeks pre-test and 79.2% post intervention ($\chi^2(1) = 4.33, p \leq 0.01$) (see Table 1) with reports of name calling having the most significant reduction ($\chi^2(1) = 4.9, p \leq 0.01$). Interestingly, while no significant differences were found between boys and girls pre-intervention in terms of reports of physical bullying (hitting and kicking), significantly fewer females reported being hit or kicked post-intervention ($\chi^2(1) = 4.19, p \leq 0.05$).

In the control school, no significant increase or decrease in bullying was reported across the nine-week period. The most common types of reported bullying were name-calling, hitting and kicking, rumour-spreading. Significant differences were found between sexes pre-test. Girls reported significantly less experiences of hitting and kicking,

theft and threats compared to boys ($\chi^2(1) = 4.38, p \leq 0.05$; $\chi^2(1) = 7.07, p \leq 0.05$ and $\chi^2(1) = 6.11, p \leq 0.01$ respectively). Post-test, girls reported significantly less hitting and kicking, name calling and theft of personal possessions than boys ($\chi^2(1) = 4.89, p \leq 0.05$; $\chi^2(1) = 3.99, p \leq 0.05$ and $\chi^2(1) = 4.81, p \leq 0.05$ respectively).

General well-being

Pupils completed the KINDL-R questionnaire, in which higher scores represent perceptions of a better quality of life when compared to lower scores. Mean scores were analysed using a One-Way ANOVA. Pupils from the PP intervention school reported feeling significantly better about their physical health at post-test ($F(1, 447) = 7.56, p \leq 0.01$) and they also reported significantly better feelings about their family ($F(1, 437) = 4.27, p \leq 0.05$) and feelings in general ($F(1, 445) = 5.26, p \leq 0.05$). Notably, feelings about school did not improve, nor did feelings about themselves and friends. The aggregate scores across the six sub-scales generated a mean general well-being score. Pupils in the PP intervention school reported feeling significantly better overall ($F(1, 448) = 6.53, p \leq 0.01$).

Within the control sample, no significant differences were found pre-and post-test across the six sub-scales and the total well-being mean score (see Figures 1–6).

Mental health

Pre- and post-test scores were compared using a One-Way ANOVA. No significant differences were found in either of the two schools.

Discussion

The PP approach aimed to reduce the levels of bullying by building pupils' interpersonal qualities using activities delivered in PSHE lessons. Overall, reports of bullying by type did decline by approximately one-third after nine weeks which is encouraging, although as Naylor and Cowie (1999) point out interventions can sometimes hyper-sensitise

Item	Experimental		χ^2	Control	
	Test	Yes (%)		Yes (%)	χ^2
I haven't been bullied in the past two weeks	Pre	70.6	4.33*	68.5	0.00
	Post	79.2		68.3	
I've been called names about my ethnicity or colour	1	7.5	0.78	5.6	0.23
	2	5.4		6.8	
I've been hit or kicked	1	8.7	0.48	11.7	0.11
	2	6.9		10.6	
I've been called other names	1	22.5	4.90*	22.2	0.89
	2	14.4		18	
Rumours have been spread about me	1	8.3	0.30	9.9	0.32
	2	6.9		8.1	
No one speaks to me	1	2	0.16	4.3	2.82
	2	1.5		1.2	
I have been frightened when a particular person looks or stares at me	1	2.4	0.08	4.9	0.70
	2	2		3.1	
I've had my belongings taken	1	4.7	0.02	5.6	0.25
	2	4.5		4.3	
I've been threatened with violence	1	2.8	0.30	6.8	0.92
	2	2		4.3	
My homework has been taken or destroyed	1	0	1.26	1.2	0.33
	2	0.5		0.6	
I've seen graffiti about me	1	2	0.00	1.9	0.20
	2	2		1.2	
I've been pressured into smoking	1	1.6	3.22	2.5	0.14
	2	0		1.9	
I've been pressured into drinking alcohol	1	2	1.89	0	2.03
	2	0.5		1.2	
I've been pressured into taking drugs	1	1.2	2.41	0.6	1.00
	2	0		0	
I've been bullied in other ways	1	4	0.32	8	0.75
	2	3		5.6	
* = p ≤ 0.05					

Table 1: Nature and prevalence of bullying

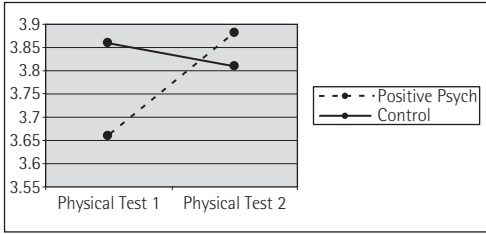


Figure 1: Physical.

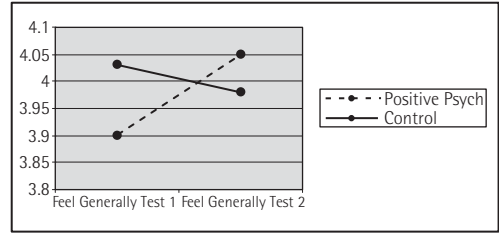


Figure 2: Feeling in general.

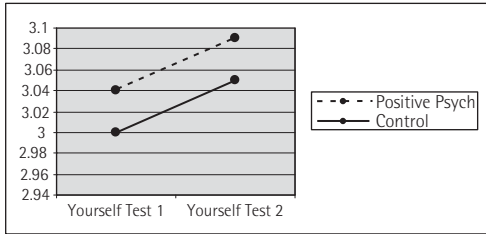


Figure 3: Feelings about yourself.

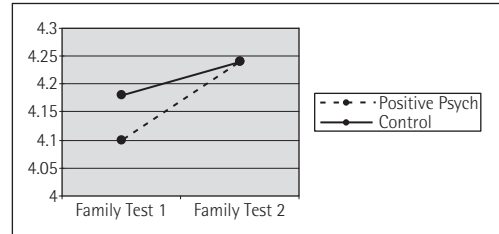


Figure 4: Feelings about family.

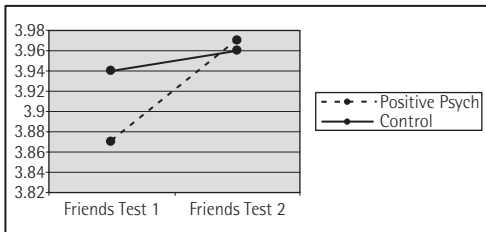


Figure 5: Feelings about friends.

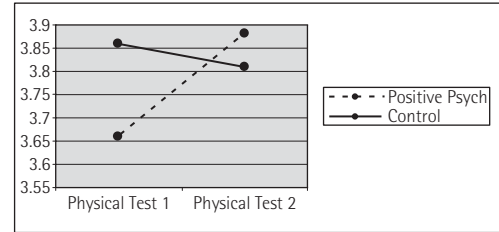


Figure 6: Feelings about school.

pupils to the issues of bullying, which can result in an increase in reports, or even a potential decline if pupils believe they are being monitored. We found that name-calling reduced dramatically over the nine-week period within the PP intervention school, and while this was the only significant change, a trend was apparent. No significant differences in any form of bullying were found in the control school.

In terms of general well-being, pupils in the PP intervention school reported feeling significantly better about their health, family life and feelings generally after nine weeks which suggests that the PP approach does have a role to play in developing pupils' personal and social development. Interestingly, as researchers we may have fallen into the trap that Seligman and his colleagues warn against: namely attempting to introduce an

intervention in isolation, ignoring the 'whole school' – the well-being of teachers, other pupils, and of course parents. Notwithstanding this flaw, it is clear that students in the PP intervention school did improve in terms of general well-being, and this requires explanation. One aspect of the PP intervention involved pupils listing three things they were grateful for, at the end of each day for one week. This was an adaptation of Seligman's (2005) gratitude visit. This may have contributed in some small measure to better well-being scores at post-test as pupils had learnt to spend time reflecting upon positive aspects of family life and friendship, thus taking their focus away from negative experiences such as bullying. This supports Seligman's initial findings and suggests that these types of exercises are also effective for children.

Developing their own interpersonal qualities was a key focus in this intervention and may have been particularly rewarding for those pupils (bullies and victims alike) who experienced low-self-esteem and in re-structuring pupils' views towards amiability, altruism, and team spirit. The intention here was to develop better cooperation and a sense of amiability among peers. Indeed, much of the work focused on developing these qualities in a specific contextual framework (i.e. how such qualities can be used to reduce bullying). The reduction in reports of bullying suggests that pupils may have applied these qualities to a greater degree than before or perhaps in a different way, as the intervention exemplified.

We did not find any significant change in pupils' mental health between the pre- and post-test in the PP intervention school. Clearly the PP intervention did not have an immediate or direct impact on mental health, and it may have been overly ambitious of us to expect to see discernable improvement in such a short-period of time. While the six BSI dimension scores varied considerably in the control school at pre- and post-test with no discernable pattern, in the PP intervention school, the scores remained stable which can be interpreted in positive terms. However, it seems likely with such a short-intervention measures of mental health are unlikely to prove useful indicators of change.

There were limitations in conducting this study, largely related to organisational issues in the schools concerned. Initially it was envisaged that the whole of Key Stage 3 and

4 in each school would participate. Due to factors such as revision for examinations, examination timetabling and work experience, this was not possible. Only one year in both schools was available during time of participation (Year 7), so we were unable to work with the 'whole school', and thus the pupils in the study undertook this programme in isolation. The schools participated at different times of the year: the PP intervention study school began the intervention in March 2004 and the control school undertook the pre-test questionnaire in January 2005.

Conclusion

Results indicated that, among those pupils who experienced the PP intervention programme, levels of bullying reduced and they scored marginally better in terms of general well-being but not mental health. The short duration of this study is likely to have militated against effectively evaluating the potential benefits of PP in terms of pupils' mental health. Overall, it seems likely that PP's contribution to school-based anti-bullying interventions will be in terms of supporting long-term rather than short-term initiatives, and could perhaps represent an important component of a wider 'whole school' anti-bullying intervention.

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Developing student wellbeing and resilience using a group process

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Abstract

Emotional wellbeing and resilient behaviour is of fundamental importance and inhibited by the well documented prevalence of relational aggression amongst adolescent girls in schools. This often subtle and insidious form of aggression damages relationships within peer groups either by excluding and isolating girls from the group or by damaging their reputation. Research is showing that the outcome of relational aggression can be loss of self-esteem, school avoidance or more serious psychological damage leading to mental illness (Rigby, 2005; Owens et al., 2000). Within a school setting valuable learning time is taken up dealing with the disputes of relational aggression. The aim of this research was to use group processes to provide some psycho-education to name the conflict that exists and to examine the processes occurring.

A girl's friendship group of 12 members was invited to take part in four sessions of group work run by school counsellors to examine the nature of the conflict arising in their group and to learn better ways of dealing with this. Positive psychology research indicates that interventions can be successful when the strengths of individuals are articulated and used within a group process (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The group facilitated open discussion with clear articulation of the problems each experiences, together with attempts to deal with these problems. The process of developing pro-social skills, empathy and effective conflict resolution skills has resulted in greater emotional literacy of the girls in this group and the girls report being empowered to deal with conflict.

The incidence and impact of relational bullying

Social and emotional wellbeing is a desired outcome for all children. Some children are able to maintain a healthy emotional wellbeing while others are more prevalent to mental health problems such as anxiety and depression (Rowling & Kasunic, 2006). Risk factors for mental health problems do not affect all children and adolescents in the same way, indicating that certain protective factors must be present to enable some children to be more resilient (Ungar, 2005). Resilience is defined by Alvord and Grados (2005) as skills, attributes and abilities that enable individuals to adapt to hardships, difficulties and challenges. Noble and McGrath (2005, p.749) refer to resilience as 'the ability to bounce back after encountering difficulties, negative events, hard times or adversity and to be able to return to the original level of emotional wellbeing.'

The peer group plays a critical role in the psychological and physical health of adoles-

cent girls (Reynolds & Repetti, 2006). Peers can be a source of support and strength as well as a source of stress. The importance of peer relationships for a girl's emotional and psychological wellbeing is well documented (Dutrizac, 2006; Noble & McGrath, 2005; Rowling & Kasunic, 2006).

The evidence of relational aggression in girls' groups, however, is evident and quite well researched (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; James & Owens, 2004; Rigby, 2000, 2005). It can be broadly defined as the purposeful manipulation and damage of peer relationships often leading to social exclusion (Martin & Gillies, 2004). The subtle nature of this type of bullying behaviour makes dealing with it extremely difficult. How do you report being left out of an outing, or having someone roll their eyes when you speak? It is often difficult for victims to be heard as both parents and teachers dismiss it as trivial. However, research shows that in adolescent girls, symptoms of depression and anxiety increase where there is ongoing relational bullying

(Cox, 1995). The target often appears powerless to deal with the subtle and insidious nature of this form of aggression.

Girls' friendship groups are dynamic and fluid and characterised by changes in the roles of individual members in the group (Owens, Shute & Slee, 2000). Girls will try to harm another person's relationship to enhance their position in the group. Girls will at times form alliances with other group members to push out one member of the group. There are always bystanders who seemingly do not have a role but who give support to this relational bullying by their silence and acceptance of this behaviour as normal (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Because girls generally form tighter social cliques, and consider friendship to be most important, being popular and having a 'best friend' is paramount. This need gives rise to girls using tools such as gossip, hurtful emails, mobile phone text messages and cyber chat rooms to manipulate the social context of their group in order to enhance or ensure their position in the group (Rigby, 2005).

Families and school personnel may refer to girls bullying behaviour as an inherent nature of girls, e.g. 'girls are bitches'. Yet acceptance of this behaviour means that girls who are victims of this social form of bullying are often powerless to deal with it or to get any help. Rigby (2005) has researched the poor mental health outcomes of victims of bullying. As with all such behaviour, there is often an interchange of position from target to bully. Historically aggressive behaviour was seen as being the domain of boys and males generally and it was believed that girls were not aggressive (Olweus et al., 1980). Lager-spetz et al. (1988) and Crick and Grotpeter (1995) in their research confirmed that females can be aggressive but the form differs from male aggression. Crick and Grotpeter (1995) showed that female children were more relationally aggressive than male children, findings replicated in Australia (Rigby, 2000) Great Britain (Smith & Shu, 2000), in the US (Egan & Perry, 1998) and Italy (Baldry, 2004). Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) research results were consistent with

the theory that the goals of boys are more associated with physical dominance while the goals of girls are associated with intimate relationships.

Although it is confusing to see what the clear motivation for this relational bullying is, it revolves around the need for intimate relationships as well as the 'position' of individual girls within the group. There is an acceptance of the position of 'queen bee' which is in hierarchical terms the top position within a group that many group members aspire to (Wiseman, 2002). Being 'best friends' with the queen bee is also prestigious within the group. These positions can be challenged by other group members and usually result in conflict. Underlying this vying for position and hence status is a need to belong and have a sense of importance within the group. Conflict can result when individuals are excluded from group activities by not being invited to participate, by the spreading of gossip which undermines a person or by being ridiculed for some action or perceived action by other group members. These forms of aggression serve to damage the relationships between individuals within the group (Simmons, 2004).

Although it appears on the surface that the relational aggression that occurs has no clear purpose or intention and that perhaps it is in the 'mind of the target', closer scrutiny results in evidence of quite deliberate and hurtful processes which although insidious are in fact wilfully damaging of relationships within the group (Rigby, 2005). This results in lowered self-esteem of targets and psychological distress (Forero et al., 1999; Slee, 1995). This is evidenced by feelings of unhappiness, avoidance of school as well as anxiety and often depression (Salmon et al., 1998). Depressive reactions of targeted children in schools have been reported internationally. (Callaghan & Joseph, 1995; Kumpulainen et al., 1998).

Promoting positive peer relationships to counteract both relational aggression and its impact

Rigby (2000) in his research with adolescent students found that the negative impact of relational bullying and peer victimisation could be improved for individuals when there was perceived positive social support. In his study, it was concluded that high levels of social support could lessen the negative impact of relational bullying and increase psychological wellbeing. Social supports for adolescents are most powerful within their peer group and this study aimed to use the peer group as a factor of social support. Optimistic and resourceful thinking, self-efficacy and a positive view of the world are important factors in being resilient (Noble & Mc Grath, 2005). Many of these attributes are skills and hence can be taught and learnt.

Rational for the intervention

The purpose of this study was to use the peer group to build emotional wellbeing and resilience in adolescent girls by naming the underlying processes that were occurring in the group and using that information to teach pro-social values of empathy and effective skills for conflict resolution. The premise used was that a psycho-educational process could name the behaviours that the girls were engaging in and then to use the group process to teach positive social skills in order to develop emotional wellbeing and resilience. The group was also employed to serve as a social support network for the girls in this peer group.

Within positive psychology there is a growing movement which places greater emphasis on the positive aspects of human nature. It focuses on 'the scientific study of human strengths and virtues as well as the variables that promote positive traits and emotions' (Miller & Nickerson, 2007, p.147). Within this paradigm, it is possible to name and draw out, the goodness of children, to promote better ways of behaving. Interventions can be presented for altering and enhancing children's and adolescents' per-

spectives regarding actions in the past and the possibilities for the future. This perspective from positive psychology considers what is right rather than what is wrong with people (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

Method

Participants

The participants were a group of 12 girls, members of one friendship group. The girls were aged 13 or 14 and were all in Year 8 at a high school. This group was chosen because the Year Adviser indicated constant and continual issues arising within this friendship group resulting in hours spent negotiating disputes. The girls often were upset or angry because of the issues arising within the group. Valuable class time was being eroded trying to resolve disputes. One of the members of the group was considering changing schools because of the relational bullying that she was experiencing. Each member of the group was invited to take part in four sessions with all the other group members to talk about the relational bullying within that group. The participants were told that they would learn some skills in dealing with relational bullying. All the members of the group willingly agreed to participate. The group leaders were two school counsellors and the Year Adviser.

Materials

The adults involved identified the major areas for the development of wellbeing. These themes were then used to create a psycho-educational lesson plan for each session. The session themes and processes for each week are in Figure. 1

Procedure

The group met for 45 minutes once a week for four weeks. They were taken out of a different subject class each week to minimise the loss of subject content for any one class. Basic group rules were established and written up at the first session. These included confidentiality of the sessions, one

person to speak at a time while the others listened and treating each other with respect.

Each session then went through the content using the processes listed. After session one there was a brief recap of the previous session and any issues that arose.

Results and Discussion

From session one it was evident that the girls in this group were able to articulate the nature of the conflict they experience within the group. This included 'gossiping' about one another, giving someone the 'look', rumour spreading, involving the whole group

when there was an issue between two girls, creating big scenes by involving others, talking about others behind their back as well as using cyber chat rooms to damage a girl's reputation. They were also able to speak about the tension that fighting in the group created, the fact that there were many sides to the issue they were fighting about and at times that the conflict existed on many levels even though it appeared trivial at one level e.g. one girl shared the difficulty she experienced when she was excluded from something and it wasn't just about being left out but went back to a situation that involved a boy and was

<p>Session 1- Naming what is</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Didactic approach to hierarchical position of girl groups● Examining culture of girl groups● Teasing out 'how' groups work● Developing pro-social behaviours <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Brainstorm on the board what they see as the 'positions' or 'functions' in a group● Role play a conflict situation of a threesome where misunderstanding occurs● Discuss what happened in the role play● From the discussion pull out and record the information on the nature of groups and how they operate● Examine positive prosocial behaviours and how to work on these – behaviours such as listening to your friend, building a real relationship, responding to one another with kindness and social awareness as well as responding with empathy	<p>Session 2 – Developing skills in social problem solving</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Trying to get the group members to see their position in a group and the importance of social skills within this group● Importance of acting individually – taking responsibility for themselves but with a social conscience for others● Identifying risky behaviour – spreading gossip, excluding others● How to behave more resourcefully- being aware of others, having empathy for each other, respecting the rights of other girls to act individually, taking responsibility for themselves <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Recap from last week about group membership● Role plays (2) of scenarios where people act as a group● Discussion after each role play of risky/ resourceful behaviour – where risky behaviour involves pulling others down, spreading rumours, passing on gossip and embellishing it. Resourceful behaviour includes the value of a real relationship, tuning into your friends needs, being aware of your own 'baggage' in the relationship, valuing the difference in others and being willing to listen with empathy● Further discussion of resourceful behaviour when things happen in a group – use of a video clip here to spark the discussion
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<p>Session 3 – Developing positive skills for difficult situations</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Skills I need when there is a problem ● Acting individually in response to 'a disaster' ● Teaching them to deal 1:1 with a problem with an individual member ● How to successfully manage conflict and stay friends ● Anger and how to manage it successfully <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Role play a 'disaster' ● Brainstorm solutions to this situation ● Teach assertiveness skills – making 'I' statements, avoiding absolutes, only deal with the situation at present, the relationship is more important than 'winning' ● Give strategies for managing conflict – address the issue with the relevant person, tell them how you feel, explain the hurt, have good will to resolve the conflict, remember the importance of the relationship with your friend and hence try not to involve others in this situation ● Use the strategies for managing conflict in a scenario 	<p>Session 4 – A positive spin</p> <p>Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The importance of self-esteem ● The goodness of all people ● How can harmony be maintained in the group <p>Process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use 'boxes' to decorate with my gifts. Each girl was given a small cardboard box with a slot in the top. Words indicating positive attributes were written on the outside of the boxes. ● Invite each person to add a gift to someone else's box ● What will happen next time there is a problem situation- ask them to retell the prosocial values they have learnt ● Get them to give you strategies for successfully managing the next difficult situation ● Go over the importance of the group in supporting each other to be the best person they can be
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Figure 1: Session content and process.

never satisfactorily resolved at that point. They spoke about trying to get people on side by texting them or using a chat room to 'shore up' their support. As long as the aggression was toward someone else in the group then you were kept fairly 'safe' yourself. There was comfort expressed by this thought. This process gave them a sense of power within the group and allowed conflicts to continue. One person described this process using this metaphor – 'you start off in this fight with an apple and before you know it you have fruit salad'. The metaphor was used to describe how a small issue quickly escalated to involve many more girls and more issues.

The other important finding of this process was the tenuous nature of friendships within this group. Everyone spoke about the importance of a 'best friend' and yet the best friends changed frequently and were also the source of

betrayal of confidences and secrets. Girls were able to speak clearly about how this happens *'it starts off when Louise is my best friend and I tell her a secret and she keeps that confidence until we are fighting and then this secret is used as ammunition against me. Then I feel really let down'*.

The most popular girl in the group has other girls wanting to be her best friend but in the process her position of most popular is also quietly being challenged. The girls were able to talk about the 'rattng' on your best friend just to pull her down as one of the things that happens in their group often. This revolves around jealousy for the position of most popular. The discussion around this point drew in the need to feel important and to have a sense of belonging. One of the tasks was to brainstorm how girls' needs for belonging and acceptance can be met without 'pulling down' other girls in the process. This prosocial aspect of their

learning allowed the girls to experience that they can relate in another way and that their personal wellbeing is in fact enhanced when they act positively and with emotional confidence and maturity. Dutrizac (2006) confirms that individuals high on levels of self construction experience greater positive emotions. This was fruitful and served as a means of social support that the girls can provide for one another. Rigby (2005) reports the importance of social support for the psychological wellbeing of adolescents.

The girls were also able to discern that at times the conflict within the group also revolves around boys. The issues over boys are more covert and escalate if any girl is given attention by a 'hot' boy. This involves jealousy and often results in gossip and rumour spreading to bring that girl down. Discussion about jealousy was quite painful at times but resulted in an awareness of the need to deal with those feelings within oneself rather than transferring them to a friend. To quote:

I can see now how ugly it is that I try and pull you down because I feel jealous cause you're so pretty and popular.

Surprisingly, the girls were open and honest in discussion about this process and were willing to name the jealousy and 'pulling down' for what it was. This in itself was a cathartic process for many of the girls in the group because they could 'suddenly' understand more clearly what they do to one another. This emotionally literate response was enhanced by the openness of the group process and the positive value of feeling safe and heard by the group. Respect for one another was built in this process.

Teaching the girls some basic rules of dealing with and successfully managing conflict was also an important aspect of this group process. The basic message was to state your case using 'I' messages; stick to the issue at hand; do not engage in character assassination; if the fight is between you and one other person then do not involve the rest of the group. The girls were keen to share that since they learnt some of these rules for managing conflict, there had not been a major 'blow up'

and neither had the whole group been drawn into any conflict. The Year Adviser who indicated that she had not had to 'disentangle' a single fight amongst the girls attested to this. This was in contrast to prior to the group process where nearly everyday there was 'some crisis' or other to sort out within this group of girls. Skilling individuals in managing conflict gives rise to confidence in handling oneself in a difficult situation and this then gives rise to resilience. Resilience is influenced by environmental factors and greater resilience results when people are empowered to deal with difficult situations (Rutter, 1999).

Social isolation is one outcome of relational bullying. One girl shared that she was considering changing schools because of the constancy and viciousness of the relational bullying within the group prior to the group sessions. Post group sessions, individuals spoke with greater hope that positive friendships could be maintained. Social isolation leads to social maladjustment and often school avoidance (Zubrick et al., 1997). The positive aspect of psycho-education on this issue results in girls taking greater responsibility for what and how they say things because of their awareness of the damage they can cause. This awareness is pivotal in relationship building within the group.

The session on building self-esteem was important because each girl was able to name some qualities that she had and was happy about. Pointing out that self-esteem is not competitive or does not need to be comparative was freeing for many of the girls :

I really like the way I can smile easily and be friendly without comparing myself to anyone.

Once the girls had spoken about their own qualities they were then invited to write down a quality in another person in their group and to give them that piece of paper. This process cemented the sense of belonging and social cohesion that exists in the group and can be used to boost one another rather than to pull one another down. Rigby and Slee (2003) assessed the poor self-esteem of victimized adolescents.

These sessions showed the girls that they had the capacity and resolve not to gossip and spread rumours but rather to support one another. It was this process of naming qualities in others and affirming your friends which fostered and built self-esteem in group members.

Addressing the social needs of adolescents in a proactive and positive way also demonstrates to adolescents emotionally literate behaviour which aims to meet psychological needs of individuals (Roffey, 2006). The group process allowed the adults in the group to demonstrate emotionally literate behaviour as well as to affirm this behaviour in the girls as they observed it. This evidenced the positive feelings that can be generated when girls find appropriate coping behaviours. It is coping behaviours that build resilience in adolescence. Anderson and Doyle (2005) point to the importance of whole school or group approaches to resilience building in individuals. This type of group process had building resilience in girls as one of its aims. The positive aspect of resilience was demonstrated in the following event.

There was an incident between two girls some time after the group session concluded and the comment from one of the girls was that they were able to have the fight, just between two girls and they were proud to announce that they had not created 'fruit salad'. They also reported:

I'm so proud because I've learnt to manage small fights in a much better way and I feel so good about myself.

Relational bullying is such a covert process and will exist in some form or other in most groups but the importance of understanding the process and naming the behaviours cannot be underestimated. This form of bullying underlies a great deal of anxiety and depression in adolescent girls (Rigby, 2005). If dealing with it within the group not in a punitive way but in a psycho-educational way can eradicate some of the insidious and vicious behaviour then it is a worthwhile process. The group process allowed the girls to feel supported by one another. Social support helps

to alleviate the impact of peer victimization. It also allowed the girls to develop some greater emotional literacy and to build their self-esteem. These skills that the girls have learnt are indeed life skills and therefore have relevance beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

The importance of well adjusted, resilient adolescents is self evident. The deleterious effects of relational aggression or peer victimization are well documented (Rigby, 2000; Smith et al., 1999). The prevalence and devastation caused by this social exclusion and damaging psychological factors have been proven to harm individuals. Girls use relational bullying to harm the intimate relationships that they need for emotional growth in often covert and insidious ways (Olweus, 1993). This study reports on the positive use of the group process to name behaviours and expose the process of relational bullying, giving both victims and bullies a shared language to use as well as skills to develop.

There is an empirical base demonstrating the positive influence of school based prevention programs as having positive effects on psychological wellbeing, creating protective factors and resilience as well as enhancing academic outcomes (Anderson & Doyle, 2005). Emotional and psychological wellbeing of students needs to be a focus in psychological intervention. This intervention focused on the positive aspects of being proactive in dealing with relational aggression in girls and highlights the importance of using group processes and psychological education for positive ends.

Positive psychology constructs of self-efficacy, optimism, and self regulation can be included in all aspects of counselling and working with children and adolescents (Harris et al., 2007). The importance of self-efficacy in psychological and health-related processes has been well documented (Bandura, 1997, Harris et al, 2007). This focus empowers people to work with their strengths and find solutions and positive out-

comes to difficulties. This is in contrast to seeing problems and pathologising children and adolescents. The positive psychology process has the potential to promote social and emotional learning as a universal need in schools. This style of health promotion can lead to greater emotional wellbeing and safety for children in schools. Building an individual's awareness of the positive aspects of their emotional health has far greater reaching prospects than simply determining the problem. Using a positive approach enhances children's and adolescents' view of past and present events and allows them to develop hopes for the future (Miller & Nickerson, 2007).

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